

The Genesis of the Joseph Smith Papers Project

*Richard Lyman Bushman, Ronald K. Esplin, Dean C. Jessee,
and Richard E. Turley Jr.*

Moderated by Matthew C. Godfrey

The following is a transcript of a roundtable discussion on October 2, 2017, about the origins of the Joseph Smith Papers Project. This roundtable, held in the Church History Library classroom, was moderated by Matthew C. Godfrey and featured Dean C. Jessee, Ronald K. Esplin, Richard L. Bushman, and Richard E. Turley Jr. The audience mainly comprised members of the project staff. The recorded remarks have been edited for clarity and readability.

Matt Grow:¹ The idea to have an event like this came as we realized that few of our staff knew Dean Jessee or Richard Bushman during the time that they were involved with the project. We thought this might be a way to help people renew acquaintances and learn some things about the project, its intent, and what happened in the early years. We're thrilled that everyone would come and be involved.

Staff members will briefly introduce our four panelists: Ron Esplin, Dean Jessee, Richard Bushman, and Rick Turley. Matt Godfrey will then introduce our staff and moderate the discussion.

Robin [Jensen] will introduce Dean; I'll introduce Ron; Jed [Woodworth] will introduce Richard; and Riley [Lorimer] will say something about Rick.

1. At the time this panel was held, Matt Grow was director of the Publications Division in the Church History Department and a general editor of the Joseph Smith Papers.

Robin Jensen:² Good morning. Dean Jessee began employment at the Church Historian's Office in 1964. His stories of "the cage," Andrew Jensen's archive, or seemingly daily discoveries of historic gems have been a rare treat to hear. On one level, the work done by Dean starting over fifty years ago is shown in the many articles and books he wrote or edited. However, for us today, his work is not only found on our shelves or our file cabinets; his influence permeates our daily work within the Joseph Smith Papers [Project], ranging from our editorial standards, our approach to annotation, and our document selection. Dean's humble attitude and exceptional scholarship offer a unique combination rarely found in academia, and we are blessed to have him here today. His mentorship, friendship, quiet leadership, and surprising dry wit have shaped the project, and for that I will be forever grateful to him.

Matt Grow: I think Ron [Esplin] is the person who needs the least introduction here. Reflecting back on my experiences with Ron, one incident came to mind, and that was a time when Ron shared his career broadly with us. It helped me realize that one of the things that drove Ron in his career was the sense of compiling the resources, compiling the people, and then protecting those people and those resources so that excellent history could be done. That required a certain personality, a tenaciousness, maybe a pugnacity at times in protecting those resources, in protecting the people so that the history could be done. It required his own depth of knowledge about the history, his own scholarly excellence so he could lead the group, but there's no way that this room would be here and that we would all have the positions that we do without Ron's leadership for the past thirty years.

Richard Bushman: Hear! Hear!

Jed Woodworth:³ Richard Bushman is often admired for the range of his great scholarly output. He was trained as a colonial historian, but more than half of his work is set in the nineteenth century. He is a social historian, but he also writes and plumbs a history of ideas. He writes on the history of gentility. From that you would think he is interested in top-down discourse, but then his latest book is on the history of farming, which suggests an interest in bottom-up discourse. So the question is,

2. At the time this panel was held, Robin Jensen was associate managing historian of the Joseph Smith Papers and a volume editor with primary responsibility over the Revelations and Translations series.

3. In addition to assisting Richard Bushman in the research and writing of *Joseph Smith: Rough Stone Rolling*, Jed Woodworth was the managing historian of *Saints*, the four-volume history of the Church.

What is Richard Bushman, really? He's sort of a schizophrenic character. *[audience laughter]*

I would suggest to you that, really, Richard Bushman is a truth teller. He tells the truths that other people do not want to say, are fearful of saying, or don't know how to say. I went back to my journal for examples of how this works out in Richard Bushman's career. I found an entry from the kickoff meeting, the meeting where the Joseph Smith Papers was launched by Elder [Neal A.] Maxwell in 2001. At that meeting, which was led by Rick Turley, Richard was the last person to speak. I think there were some final comments by Rick, but he asked Richard to say a few words. I just wanted to read what he said.

Richard said, "This project is a leap of faith. We are taking a chance, as Elder Maxwell said. Can we do it right? Can we do it convincingly? The Brethren are taking a chance on us." Richard then seemed to engage with Elder Maxwell's "heartburn" comment. (I'll have to explain that to you later.) "We will run into problems," he said. "The best way to get through them is to go right to their center, not to go around them, or over them, or to the side of them, but to go to the heart of them." By putting it this way, Richard imagined a space where both scholars and leaders agree on an approach to problems; avoidance or cowardice was the wrong way to go, he was saying. We should all agree on that.⁴

So I think the essence of the Joseph Smith Papers Project, which is to tell the truth and to not avoid problems, is Richard's stamp on the project.

Riley Lorimer:⁵ Rick [Turley], as many of you may know, is now managing director of Public Affairs. I confirmed with him this morning that it actually feels very calm and like a homecoming to come back to this building [Church History Library].

Rick is an attorney by training but has worked in Church History or Family History [Departments] for several decades. He was managing director of the Family and Church History Department when the Joseph Smith Papers [Project] began and when it moved up here to Church headquarters in 2005. Rick played an absolutely indispensable role in the creation of the project as it exists today. During his eight years as assistant Church historian and recorder, he served on the Joseph Smith Papers editorial board—and saying that doesn't quite give an accurate sense of how involved Rick was and how important he was to the project

4. Quote from Jed Woodworth's personal journal.

5. At the time this roundtable was held, Riley Lorimer was associate editorial manager of the Joseph Smith Papers.

during that time. He also coedited the second volume of the *Revelations and Translations* series and was heavily involved with volumes 1 and 3, which is where I got to know Rick—working closely with him and with Robin [Jensen] on those volumes.⁶

Rick's a hugely accomplished person, and I don't have time to list all of his many publications and his many awards, though you should check it out on Church Newsroom. I was even surprised. There were things there that I didn't know. He's done so much in his career. But I want to say just two things from my personal experience with Rick.

The first is that Rick is a person who knows the value of relationships. Over decades of work, he established relationships of trust with Church leadership that have opened countless doors for the Joseph Smith Papers [Project] and for the telling of history in the Church. Rick was the person that they trusted to come and take the picture of the seer stone that hadn't been seen for a hundred years⁷ [see fig. 1]. It's in part because of the relationships of trust that he built that we have been able to feature documents that haven't been seen before—feature things like the seer stone—and to have the leadership of the Church feel safe and trusting about that.

But it's not just relationships with the people above him—Rick also makes relationships with the people he works with every day. I was always amazed when Rick would see me in the hall; he'd be escorting someone through the Church History Library, and he'd stop and introduce me to whoever he was escorting that day. He would remember what I got my degrees in and that I redid my house all by myself and introduced me and made me feel more impressive than I probably really was.

6. Robin Scott Jensen, Robert J. Woodward, and Steven C. Harper, eds., *Revelations and Translations, Volume 1: Manuscript Revelation Books*, Joseph Smith Papers (Church Historian's Press, 2009); Robin Scott Jensen, Richard E. Turley Jr., and Riley M. Lorimer, eds., *Revelations and Translations, Volume 2: Published Revelations*, Joseph Smith Papers (Church Historian's Press, 2011); Royal Skousen and Robin Scott Jensen, eds., *Revelations and Translations, Volume 3, Part 1: Printer's Manuscript of the Book of Mormon, 1 Nephi 1–Alma 35*, Joseph Smith Papers (Church Historian's Press, 2015); Royal Skousen and Robin Scott Jensen, eds., *Revelations and Translations, Volume 3, Part 2: Printer's Manuscript of the Book of Mormon, Alma 36–Moroni 10*, Joseph Smith Papers (Church Historian's Press, 2015).

7. See "Seer Stone," The Joseph Smith Papers, Church Historian's Press, accessed June 30, 2025, <https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/topic/seer-stone>; and "Note on Seer Stone Images," Joseph Smith Papers, accessed June 30, 2025, <https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/site/note-on-seer-stone-images>.



FIGURE 1. Seer stone belonging to Joseph Smith. Courtesy Church History Library.

The second thing I want to say is that Rick values good ideas. I was struck when I first came here—I was only twenty-two; I was fresh out of school; and because someone else left (because she had a baby), I was thrown very quickly into the leadership of a volume and immediately into another one that was published the year after that. Rick didn't care that I was twenty-two years old and very new. If I had something smart to say, he wanted to hear it, and he took it very seriously.

In *Revelations and Translations, Volume 2*, Rick wrote the first draft of the introduction—which was around seventy pages long—about three times longer than we wanted it to be. Rick didn't hesitate at all to hand me the seventy pages and say, "I know this isn't right. I know you can fix it. Take it and come back to me." I've never seen him dismiss a good idea, regardless of where it came from, and that's something I really admire about him. He's an advocate and a distinguished scholar in his own right, and we're lucky to have him here today.

Matthew Godfrey:⁸ Thanks for those introductions. We thought for your [*the panelists*] benefit we'd do just a brief introduction of the staff to show how young our staff is. How many here, if you could stand

8. At the time this panel was held, Matthew Godfrey was the managing historian and a general editor of the Joseph Smith Papers.

up, have been with the project just one or two years? [*staff standing*] How many have been here three to five years on the project? [*staff standing*] So probably the majority of our staff has been here from one to five years. How many have been here six to ten years? [*staff standing*] And how many longer than ten? [*staff standing*] I think that shows that we have many staff members who have contributed to the project over a long period of time. We also have many staff members who are relatively new and have contributed to the project over the last one to five years.

We also wanted to give a couple of statistics (before we get into questions) that we thought you'd be interested in. We had Riley calculate how many total book sales of the Joseph Smith Papers we have had up to the present, so these are fresh numbers. We have sold over 150,000 volumes.⁹ So this project that you are all instrumental in beginning has had a rather large reach that way. In addition to our print volumes, of course, we have our website, which is just as successful as the print volumes. Ben Godfrey is going to show us a brief overview of some statistics with the website.

Ben Godfrey:¹⁰ The Joseph Smith Papers website saw significant growth this year. One of the reasons that happened is because we created a Church history study guide.¹¹ If you follow along with the lesson, which many [Church] members do every Sunday, there's a link right from the lesson material that says, "Would you like to learn more historical information?" That links over to a page that comes from our Church History staff and includes lots of links to the Joseph Smith Papers. So we're on track for a considerable number of more unique visitors this year than we've ever had before, both in terms of visits and page views. There are thousands of people every month that are reading from the primary sources that would have never had access to that previously.

Some of our most visited pages, of course, are "Search," which means visitors are actually looking for something. They are typing in something, a word, a phrase, and they're able to find it. Joseph Smith's accounts of the First Vision are in our top views. The print volumes, people finding those and ordering them, are in the top fifteen; our videos are, again, in

9. As of the end of 2024, the Joseph Smith Papers had sold approximately 225,000 copies.

10. At the time this roundtable was held, Ben Godfrey was the Joseph Smith Papers product manager for the Church History Department.

11. This document ("Church History Study Guide," 2016) was a predecessor of "Doctrine and Covenants Historical Resources," Gospel Library, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, accessed June 30, 2025, <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/history/doctrine-and-covenants-historical-resources-2025>.

the top fifteen. Something that I'm very proud of as well is that we translated the accounts of the First Vision into multiple languages. Those are in Gospel Library, so we don't see those statistics on this because they're not on the website. But even on our website we've had almost twenty-four thousand views in multiple languages of those accounts of the First Vision. So is the word getting out? Are people learning about it through the website? Absolutely. I'm grateful to the whole team here who does such a wonderful job in preparing these materials for the web.

Matthew Godfrey: Thank you, Ben. The major reason why we're all here is to hear from Ron, Dean, Richard, and Rick about the beginnings of the project, to give a sense of the history of how this project came about and what the objectives of it were. I wonder if maybe we could start, Dean, by asking you a question. When you started with the Church in 1964 and were doing quite a bit of work on Joseph Smith and his papers, what did you foresee happening?

Dean Jessee: How much time have we got? [*audience laughter*]

Matthew Godfrey: As much as you want to take.

Dean Jessee: At my age, people like to talk a lot. When I started in the [Church] Historian's Office, I had no idea that I'd be doing what I'm doing. I had spent some time in that place during my college years doing some work on a thesis, and it was kind of like going into a candy shop but not being able to get any of the candy. I thought it would be really neat because of my interest in history to be able to work in that place because I would be able to get access to the material I wasn't able to access earlier. There was an opening that came in the manuscript section of the Historian's Office. At that time, the Historian's Office was divided into three sections: the library section, the written records, and the manuscripts. The manuscript section contained all of the handwritten material and stuff, the primary sources that a lot of us were salivating to access when we went there. I was really excited about that. At that time, the atmosphere of history wasn't what it is today. It was this feeling of trying to protect the Church from those types of things that were considered not good for you. It was kind of like shielding your children from disease and that type of thing. I thought it would be a chance for me to access the material that I hadn't been able to access when I was there earlier. But I worked there for about eight years, and it was interesting to see.

For my first job after I arrived, I was given a stack of 3×5 library cards. Most of you don't know what a library card is. It's a 3×5 card containing everything that we get electronically now. I was told to type in the subject tracings. The card had already been printed with the author and the

title and so on, but you put the “tracing” up at the top for different topics that were in that particular collection. I had a whole stack of these. The subject tracing that I was told to type at the top of the card was “Church, about.” [audience laughter] I spent about three days typing those cards, and it seemed to me that it was kind of weird. I’d been in libraries before, but I’d never seen a subject tracing that said anything like “Church, about.” I figured that practically everything in the library could have that title. I got up enough courage to talk to my superior and mentioned it to him, and he decided then that it might not be a very good subject tracing. So the job changed.

Not too long ago, I had a chance to read the manuscript that you folks put out—*Documents, Volume 8*.¹² I was amazed by the talent that’s been arrayed in producing these volumes. I mention those two things because between those two events—my typing the “Church, about” cards and the reading of *Documents, Volume 8*—I’ve had a front row seat to a marvelous revolution in the Church, a revolution involving the care and use of the records, establishing the state-of-the-art archive, and the writing and preservation of our history. It’s been amazing. I have to pinch myself to think that I happened to be in that situation. The scripture that comes to mind is in the thirty-seventh chapter of Alma where it talks about simple things [see Alma 37:6]. I was certainly in that category. The rules and regulations and the way that the records of the Church were kept in 1964 were tremendously different from what they are today.

Ron Esplin: Do you know what he [Dean] said he did? He [Dean] got advice from a high-level person, who said, “Just make yourself part of the woodwork, and eventually they’ll forget you don’t work there.” [audience laughter] And he did that.

Dean Jessee: That’s where I first met Leonard Arrington. After I was in the manuscript section for eight years, in 1972, Leonard was appointed Church historian. There had been some rumors that a new historian would be selected because President [David O.] McKay passed away in 1970, and Joseph Fielding Smith, who had been the Church Historian since way back at the beginning of the century, became the president of the Church. In his place Elder [Howard W.] Hunter was the historian or the manager of the History Department. It was under him that things kind of loosened up a little bit as far as the archives were

12. Brent M. Rogers, Brett D. Dowdle, Mason K. Allred, and Gerrit J. Dirkmaat, eds., *Documents, Volume 8: February–November 1841*, Joseph Smith Papers (Church Historian’s Press, 2019).

concerned. I knew that there would be better days ahead in the archives when Jeff Johnson and Max Evans were both hired as employees. Prior to that, there was one woman that had a master's degree in library science, but I don't think anyone else had any professional training. My background was in history, and I hadn't had any library science. When Leonard Arrington was appointed Church Historian in 1972, about a week after his appointment he requested that I transfer from the archives into the History Division that he was leading. He explained at that point some of the initiatives that he had in mind for the writing of history in the Church. One of those was to publish important documents in the archives, and we talked about topics.

Prior to that, when Elder Hunter was there, I had had an interest in publishing the first journal of Joseph Smith's, which is the one that has more of his personal handwriting than any of the other journals. I talked to Elder Hunter about it, and he said that it would be okay to go ahead, and I got started on it, but then he came back and said, "You better not do that now." He said it might be something that the Historian's Office will want to do in the future. So I didn't really develop that. But that was my first hint toward it.

When Leonard came, he talked about what came to be known as the Heritage series. It would be the publication of important documents in the archives. He asked, "What would be some possibilities?" Of course, I mentioned then that first journal of Joseph Smith and that Joseph didn't write very much himself. Compared to the entire weight of his material, it was practically nothing. We thought that it would be worthwhile to publish something that had the holograph writings of Joseph Smith, the personal writings of Joseph. So that became my first assignment in the History Division when Leonard was appointed. We spent some time on that.

My experience since then with Joseph Smith's papers has been in three categories. The first one, from 1972 to 1978, had to do with his personal writings. We finally published that volume, the *Personal Writings*, in 1984, and the reason it took so long for that was that after we got started on it, a question arose about the editorial rules.¹³ The question was, How are we going to treat the text itself? Are we going to present it exactly the way Joseph Smith wrote it, or are we going to give him a PhD in history or in English? The tendency was of course to clean it up, but

13. Dean C. Jessee, ed. and comp., *The Personal Writings of Joseph Smith* (Deseret Book, 1984).

Leonard suggested that we better go slow on the project of the Joseph Smith personal writings until we could educate the Saints—prepare their minds for seeing Joseph Smith’s handwriting the way it was and the spelling and punctuation, and so on. So that’s why it took a length of time to publish that first volume.

Then in 1986, we obtained the authorization to publish Joseph Smith’s journals. At that time, we envisioned that as being three volumes.¹⁴ We really didn’t have a plan to go beyond that early on. I was hoping that we could do Joseph Smith’s papers at some point, for the reason that the papers of the Founding Fathers were being produced at that time, some of those for the third and fourth time. I thought, Of all the people in the universe who ought to have a collection of their papers produced, it would be Joseph Smith. But we started on that project of the journals of Joseph, and it ran into some problems. It fizzled along. It went in fits and starts from about 1986 until the turn of the century, until things started to change.

About 1999, things started to change. There were a whole series of things that took place that resulted in what we have today. That’s kind of an overview of where I’ve come on this.

Matthew Godfrey: That’s great, Dean. We appreciate that. Rick, maybe you could talk about how the project was brought up to the Church History Library from BYU and the effort to find a press to publish the papers.

Rick Turley: Sure. I became interested in the work that Dean Jessee was doing before I ever came to the Church Historical Department in 1986. When I came aboard, I was immediately interested in learning what else Dean was doing. He had a series of volumes he was working on. Given the lack of time, I won’t go into a lot of detail, but let me just point out a few highlights that get to your question and add a couple more things.

Ron and Richard and I began talking about the work of the Joseph Fielding Smith Institute for Church History at BYU and the papers. Along the way, slowly the idea of a new, supercharged Joseph Smith Papers Project developed. There were three things that we felt we needed to bring together in order to make the project successful. One was talent. We saw a lot of that talent at BYU in the Joseph Fielding Smith Institute. The second was money. This kind of project does not come cheap. The third was facilities. We needed to be able to bring the people and

14. Only two volumes would be published in this iteration. Dean C. Jessee, ed., *The Papers of Joseph Smith*, 2 vols. (Deseret Book, 1989–92).

the materials together in an environment in which those working on the project could do it well.

Some of the highlights that I think we need to emphasize, and others here on the panel will emphasize, are number one, the launching of the new Papers Project in 2001. It took a lot of groundwork to have that meeting happen. We held an event at the administration building at BYU to formally launch the project. We had there BYU President Merrill Bate-man because we needed BYU's support. We had the commissioner of education for the Church Educational System, who was then Elder Henry B. Eyring. We had him there to say that not only did we have the support of the BYU administration, we had the support of the Church commissioner of education. We had Elders [Neal A.] Maxwell and [Jeffrey R.] Holland there and Elders [D. Todd] Christofferson and [Bruce C.] Hafen. Elders Maxwell and Holland, at the time, were the Quorum of the Twelve advisors to the Church Historical Department. Both had academic backgrounds, and so their presence there was helpful in two ways—one, as Church leaders and two, as academics. Elders Christofferson and Hafen were the Executive Directors of the Family and Church History Department at the time. They also had an enormous amount of influence.

We felt if we could get all of those people together in one room and launch this new, supercharged project, we wouldn't have any questions about whether this was an authorized project—that we had all of the lines involved that had approved all of this and were supportive of it. We ran into a snag, however, when the Joseph Fielding Smith Institute at BYU faced an administrative problem. The dean of the college [Family, Home, and Social Sciences] in which the institute was lodged did an evaluation of his college and decided to streamline it by shutting down the Smith Institute. Through a long series of negotiations that I won't chronicle here, we met with the academic vice president of BYU and offered to reacquire the Smith Institute. After all, it had been created from the old History Division, of which Dean and Ron were a part. So instead of shutting it down, why not bring it back to Church headquarters? A lot of work went into the negotiations and to the decision to finally bring it up here, but we decided to bring it up here and make the Joseph Smith Papers the major emphasis of the old Smith Institute when it was brought to Salt Lake.¹⁵

15. Carrie A. Moore, "Scholars Moving to S.L.: BYU Closing Research Institute Dedicated to Early LDS History," *Deseret News*, June 21, 2005, <https://www.deseret.com/2005/6/21/19898658/scholars-moving-to-s-l/>.

The timing was actually quite good because we had begun working on a new Church History Library. Beginning in 1994, we made a series of presentations to the First Presidency. The first presentation was well received, but the decision was made not to build it at that time. We made a second presentation and had a somewhat similar result. We finally got the approval in 2005 to build it, which was around the same time we were making the bid to reacquire the Smith Institute. So we were able to work into the planning process space that you occupy now for the Joseph Smith Papers Project. That all came together in a nice sort of way. We finished the building here in 2009.¹⁶

As far as the publication of the papers, we initially brought in an outside consulting team to talk about rebranding the department. The department had developed a reputation, as Dean mentioned, for being closed, for not being a place where publishing occurred, and we wanted to create a new brand for the organization. So we brought in a professional organization, and they gave us their advice on how to rebrand ourselves. As part of that, we asked them the question, Who should be the publisher of the Joseph Smith Papers? The conclusion they brought to us was, “You should absolutely have a well-established, high-profile university press publish the papers.” So we took that recommendation in hand, and we began to look at potential publishers.

One of the publishers we approached was Oxford University Press. I had a contract with Oxford at the time. I talked with Cynthia Read, who was the executive director for religious books at Oxford; she was highly interested in the project. She took it up through their system and finally replied, “We’re very interested in it, but what really puts us off is that you’re looking at a twenty-year horizon. The publishing world is undergoing such change right now, we’re not sure that we’re still going to be doing these large, multivolume projects in twenty years. So as much as we want this project, we’re going to have to decline. It’s just not knowing what the publishing world will be like in twenty years.”¹⁷

There were other university presses that we considered and even approached, and ultimately, we decided that we would publish the volumes ourselves. We felt that we would have better control over the final product, over the quality of it, and so we went against the decision of our

16. R. Scott Lloyd, “‘A Record Kept’ Among His People: Treasures of Church History Have a New Resting Place,” *Deseret News*, June 25, 2009, <https://www.thechurchnews.com/2009/6/25/23230024/a-record-kept-among-his-people/>.

17. This is Turley’s recollection of what Cynthia Read said to him.

outside advisors by creating our own press.¹⁸ We talked about what we needed to do to give this press the kind of cachet it needed to have the papers considered respectable. I made a long list of things that we had to accomplish for that to happen. One of the things was we had to meet the highest academic standards in producing it. A second was that the volumes needed to look highly professional from the perspective of the book arts. So we put a lot of time into choosing the boards, the cloth, the paper, the headbands, the type font, and other book arts features.

The same was true even with the leather volumes. Deseret Book, which we ultimately chose as our print and distribution partner, said that it could produce the leather-bound volumes. So we talked to the company's staff about our requirements for the volumes. By the time we finished the meeting, they said, "We can't meet your qualifications." Then Church printing came along, and its people said, "We can do this for you. We're sure we can meet your requirements. We print leather books all the time for Church employee gifts." And I said, "Well, this is a lot tougher than you think it's going to be. Here are the requirements you have to meet," and I gave them the details. They said, "Well, we're willing to give it a try." So they produced a volume and gave it to us, certain that it would meet our high standards. We rejected it and sent them back to the drawing board, saying, "Try again." Ultimately, they came up with what we felt was a very good product.

There was the question of what do we name this new press. Let me back up and say that in 2001, when Elder Christofferson was our Executive Director, he and I went before the First Presidency and made a report on the state of Church history in the Family and Church History Department. During that presentation, we made three recommendations. One recommendation was that we restore the office of Church Historian. That was taken under advisement. We kept on repeating this recommendation until 2005, when Elder Marlin K. Jensen was named Church Historian.¹⁹

The second thing that occurred in that 2001 meeting was that we said we needed to have a Church history presence on the internet. In 1999, when I was managing director of the Family History Department concurrently

18. R. Scott Lloyd, "New Era Dawns in LDS Publishing: Joseph Smith Papers Will Bear Church Historian's New Imprint," *Deseret News*, March 1, 2008, <https://www.deseret.com/2008/3/1/20787239/new-era-dawns-in-lds-publishing/>.

19. R. Scott Lloyd, "'Historian by Yearning' Collects, Preserves: Elder Marlin K. Jensen is Historian/Recorder," *Deseret News*, May 28, 2005, <https://www.deseret.com/2005/5/28/20790347/historian-by-yearning-collects-preserves/>.

with being the managing director of the Church History Department before we merged them in 2000, we had launched familysearch.org. Up to that time, the internet did not have a good reputation among Church leaders. They went out to stake conferences and heard horrible stories about people who had become addicted to pornography or young people who had been preyed upon in chat rooms, and so the internet wasn't even called that. Up before 1999, it was referred to at the Church offices as "the 'I' word." [*audience laughter*] You didn't want to say it out loud: it had that bad of a reputation.

So when we were about to go in to senior Church leaders in the 1990s to say we wanted to launch familysearch.org, there were people that looked at us and said, "You're absolutely crazy to go to the Brethren and suggest that you have an internet site on family history." But we decided that because it felt right, it was the thing to do. We went in, and we were later told by then Elder Boyd K. Packer that it was one of only three things during his tenure as a member of the Quorum of the Twelve that got approved instantaneously.

Having had the approval on familysearch.org, we made a pitch in 2001 that we also have a Church history presence on the internet, which eventually led to history.lds.org.²⁰

The third thing we suggested in the 2001 meeting was that we have a multivolume history, which is what led to the *Saints* project.²¹ Having made those proposals in 2001, and Elder Jensen having then been named the Church Historian, we were sitting around talking one day, and I said to him, "Well, let's name the new press after the Church Historian. Let's call it the Church Historian's Press." Elder Jensen was always very, very modest, and he said to me repeatedly, "Rick, if I were running for public office, I'd want you to be my campaign manager because you're always pushing me in front of cameras and in front of print reporters." So he was a little hesitant at first to have his title of Church Historian become the name of the press, but I said half jokingly, "Don't think about yourself, think about the office and the importance of the office."

So we called it the Church Historian's Press, and we decided that to receive that imprint, a volume had to meet two qualifications: Number one, it had to be the best that the academy had to offer. The outside

20. This website is now <https://history.churchofjesuschrist.org>,

21. *Saints: The Story of the Church of Jesus Christ in the Latter Days*, 4 vols. (The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 2018–24), <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/learn/history/saints>.

advisory board we appointed helped to assure that it met that qualification. The second qualification was that it had to represent the best the Church had to offer and have full Church approval. So we continued the process of sending it up to Church leaders for them to approve as well. So that's how we got the press, the name of the press, and the Smith Institute up [to Church headquarters] to become the Joseph Smith Papers.

Matthew Godfrey: Rick, could you talk a little bit about putting together the advisory board and its involvement?

Rick Turley: Yes. We ended up with two advisory boards, as you know. We had our inside board and our outside board. Again, the intent with the outside board was to create a panel of expert historians and documentary editing experts whose very name on the documents could give them the kind of academic cachet that we were talking about. Really, Ron and Richard, I think, had more to do with actually selecting those people than I did.

Ron Esplin: We first started thinking, I believe, about having an advisory board when we were dealing with Yale University Press. We had a conversation with them that went far down the road. We figured the control issue could be handled if we had a board that the Church had confidence in, and the academic issue could be solved if the board was something the press had confidence in. We believed we could assemble such a board. So that was part of the discussion, although we did not yet have one. Exactly like Rick mentioned with the Oxford University Press, Yale University Press was also in turmoil. They had three different heads that I dealt with during the time we were negotiating, and they had not landed on a strategy or on institutional stability. In the end, they were not willing to make a long-term commitment.

Rick Turley: But they did send some other people out here to advise us, and they were instrumental in helping us establish the Joseph Smith Papers in the right sort of academic mode.

Richard Bushman: I have a story that I'd like you two to check on. There was Yale, and then I think we made a preliminary introduction with Johns Hopkins.

Rick Turley: That's correct.

Ron Esplin: Because you had a contact.

Richard Bushman: Yes. I had submitted a book and had it rejected: *Joseph Smith and the Beginnings of Mormonism*.²² [audience laughter] So

22. Richard L. Bushman, *Joseph Smith and the Beginnings of Mormonism* (University of Illinois Press, 1984).

I thought, Why not? But as I recall, in both those cases there was initial enthusiasm, it seemed like a great project to people, but then they got to some stage in their operation where usually one individual just said, “But can we trust the materials they send us?” They really thought that the Mormons would doctor the documents in order to erase any embarrassing episodes.

Ron Esplin: That is true. And with Yale especially, we finally got approval all through the institution of the university press, but their academic board had some scholars who had exactly that concern, and that was toxic.

Rick Turley: In the case of Johns Hopkins, curiously, the person who killed it said, “Well, didn’t the Mormons have some forgeries a few years ago that they published? How can we be certain that these materials are authentic?” It was the Mark Hofmann case that killed it with Johns Hopkins.

Dean Jessee: What about Oxford?

Rick Turley: Oxford really, really wanted it. It was only the practical twenty-year cycle that kept them from doing it. After we published *Journals, Volume 1*,²³ I was talking to Cynthia one day, and I said, “You know, that volume sold sixty-seven thousand copies.” She said, “Oh, I know. We’ve been tracking it.” [*audience laughter*] They really, really wanted to do it, but you can understand the practical requirements of twenty years of publishing when your publishing company is in turmoil with everybody else.

Ron Esplin: We really had two takes at the University of Oxford Press. The first, Rick initiated. By then, we had an advisory board, and with Richard’s help, we got Harry S. Stout with Yale University on the board, who had strong ties not only with Yale Press but also with Oxford. He said, “They need to rethink this, and I will open the door for you.” And he did. There was a fresh discussion, and in the middle of that discussion, the decision was made that we were going to go down the Church Historian’s Press path. I remember going back to Stout and saying, “We really appreciate you going to bat for us; it means a great deal to us, but we aren’t going to go forward,” and I explained why. His email back to me said [something like], “You know as a long-term plan, I can see how in the very, very, very, very long future that might work [*audience laughter*], but you’re missing an opportunity here.”

23. Dean C. Jessee, Mark Ashurst-McGee, and Richard L. Jensen, eds., *Journals, Volume 1: 1832–1839*, Joseph Smith Papers (Church Historian’s Press, 2008).

Matthew Godfrey: Rick, I wonder, maybe you could give us your thoughts on the impact the project has made and any advice you'd have for us as we continue forward?

Rick Turley: In terms of the impact, I think I'll quote Elder [Steven E.] Snow, who refers to this as the lunar landing of the Church. You know, the 1969 landing on the moon was not just about getting a human footprint on that sphere, but it was about developing technology that benefited the rest of humanity; everything from aeronautics to the technology we have on our phones today benefited from the lunar landing effort. And the Joseph Smith Papers Project has had numerous impacts already and will continue to have impacts.

It was the Joseph Smith Papers and some work that I had done on the Greek New Testament and other things that led people on the Scriptures Committee to come to me and say, "We're about to do a new printing of the scriptures, and we want to know, are there any changes you might want to make?" I looked at some things they did in the other volumes of scripture and made some suggestions, but when it came to the Doctrine and Covenants, I said, "The Joseph Smith Papers volumes that have already been approved for publication are going to have different information than you have in your headings to numerous sections." They said, "Really?" I said, "Yes." I arranged a meeting with Elder Jensen and with someone from the Scriptures Committee, and Elder Jensen backed up what I'd said about the importance of the Joseph Smith Papers Project in all of this. They gave us a certain number of days to suggest changes to the headings. Matt [Grow] then took charge of the effort, with many of you, to go through and make suggestions for revising those headings. So the changes made in headings in the 2013 edition of the scriptures are definitely a result of the Joseph Smith Papers Project.

And then everything from *Saints*, which will have an enormous impact on how Church history is viewed, to what is done in curriculum in the future will be heavily based on the Joseph Smith Papers Project.

I might just say this: We had an opportunity during my time here as assistant Church historian, an opportunity that continues to this day, to begin to make presentations to the presiding quorums on Church history matters. Many of the matters that we took in for presentation were matters that we were able to elucidate because of research that we had done on the Joseph Smith Papers Project. Making those presentations before the presiding quorums helped to provide a greater uniformity of understanding among those brethren on the history of the Church and were extraordinarily helpful—not only in creating a new view of what

we do over here and a better understanding of the contributions that can be made here but also a newer and better understanding of our history and therefore what our doctrine and policy should be.

Matthew Godfrey: Well, Richard and Ron, I wonder if we could go back to the mid-1990s when discussions were occurring about doing a larger Joseph Smith Papers Project. Maybe just discuss a little bit about what thoughts you had at that time, what objectives you saw for a larger project, and why you wanted it to be done. Richard, perhaps you could start.

Richard Bushman: Well, I backed into this project, and in a way, I think the Joseph Fielding Smith Institute backed into it. I began, in 1997, teaching a summer seminar that had funding from the Joseph Fielding Smith Institute to bring in graduate students from around the country [to BYU] for six or eight weeks to work on Church history problems. Notably, I saw it as a way to study Joseph Smith's cultural context—such a huge task. I wanted to bring in people who would help us examine newspapers, pamphlets, everything under the sun that would bear on the whole Restoration process. Ron accepted the proposal immediately and started providing funding, and then there was some private funding that went along with it. As a result of that, I got involved in the process of talking about the institute. I think Ron enjoyed the idea of having someone he could talk through all the issues that were going on at that time.

Ron, I'm sure, will have his version, but basically the transfer of the History Division to BYU²⁴ seemed like a good solution at the moment to solve a problem up here and just plunk it down in BYU. But over the long run, the institute really was a square peg in a round hole. It didn't really fit for this reason: The members of the institute did very little teaching. They would teach a course now and again but not as a standard part of their duties. Their duty was to do research because that's what they'd done up here. But after a while, the dean, looking at this situation, thought, "What a cushy job you have. You don't have to do any teaching, and so you ought to be producing reams of research in publication." But the institute wasn't; it was producing stuff but not at the pace that the dean expected. So there became this intense pressure on the institute to produce—its life was at stake. There was a lot of argument over producing enough or too little. Where should we focus our efforts?

24. Richard is referring to the transfer of the history department from Church headquarters to BYU (renamed the Joseph Fielding Smith Institute) in the early 1980s.

Out of all this turmoil I remember thinking, and Ron was probably thinking the same way, the one thing that the institute can do that is suitable for an institute of this kind is to produce a documentary series; because all over the world when you do the Washington papers or the John Adams papers, you have a group of scholars who spend their whole time collecting these documents and preparing them for publication. So that's what would be expected. We wouldn't have to start producing all these little monographs that we were attempting to do at that time. So it seems to me that this was the one project that was defensible and [that] we were uniquely qualified to do. I can't remember the details of how this all worked itself out, but it was sort of the direction we were heading when Rick said, "Why not bring this whole operation up to Salt Lake?" At the time, it was one project that we loved. Dean was doing a good job, and Ron and I both battled many times to get the Joseph Smith journals finished but were hung up on volume 3. Volumes 1 and 2 had been published, but volume 3 had some difficult parts in it. There was Joseph's and Emma's scraps over polygamy, there was the whole polygamy issue, and there were temple matters in there. They weren't huge problems but little tiny passages.

Ron had been very ingenious in figuring out ways to work our way around these sensitive materials, and we would go up and present them, and [senior leaders] would take it under consideration. We thought we'd persuaded them, but we never got the final okay to do them. So what I'm saying is we had this array of things of wondering where we should focus our efforts, and among them is this project that we all valued down there, knowing we had a great prize in Dean, but we couldn't quite get it through. We were sort of stuck at that point. We had the dean, we were working with the problems with volume 3 of Joseph Smith's journals, and then we were trying to find a true mission for the institute. I'm going to stop there, Ron, because I think you're going to have other things that you'll add to that particular phase of the story.

Ron Esplin: That was chaos, and it stretched over several years. It's so complicated. I haven't quite yet figured out a way to distill it in a manageable few minutes. But Richard and I at one point went to Merrill Bateman, a member of the Seventy and president of BYU, and tried to sell him on the idea that we had to have this sort of work going on at BYU, that the university would be the poorer if we didn't do it, and that the Joseph Smith Papers was a vital part of this. One of the things that Richard said to President Bateman was, "If the Church is not on the playing field with our best scholars and our best information, we will lose this battle. And what is the battle? A lot of folks are interested in our story,

and other people will tell our story if we do not. We have to have our best out there, or we lose total control of our story.” These arguments convinced President Bateman of the value of the project.

I want to mention one thing that was a milestone in my own mind about how I viewed the importance of Dean’s work—and it was purely Dean’s work at that point. In 1984, when *Personal Writings* was published, we had a little affair on campus that Deseret Book helped promote. They brought books down for the dignitaries at BYU, and we invited deans and administrators over. Jeffrey R. Holland, who was then president of BYU, was there in 1984. I remember, in talking about it with that group, saying that I had a vision that with the publication of *Personal Writings*—some of the most intimate expressions of faith and personality that we have from Joseph Smith—with this book on the shelf, scholars can never again write about Joseph without some reference to his own materials. Yet, over time, it became clear that was not true. Because Deseret Book published it, it sold well. We got to a second edition. We sold fifteen thousand of the first edition, and I don’t know how many thousand on the second. But it was only in Latter-day Saint homes; it wasn’t in the scholars’ [hands]; it wasn’t in the libraries.

So one of my early expectations for the Joseph Smith Papers was we would finally do what I had hoped *Personal Writings* would help do but didn’t—and that is, get Joseph Smith’s materials into the libraries, into the hands of scholars, into the public awareness in a way that they could not write about Joseph without using, among all their other sources, Joseph’s own materials. That was one of the things that drove me, and I think was part of our vision as we tried to get this done.

Richard Bushman: I want to penetrate one of the mysteries of this account. Dean had been working for many years on *Personal Writings* and trying to get the three volumes of the journal out; Ron and I had been struggling trying to find a place for the institute and get the idea of the papers going. Somewhere along the line, out of the blue, came a four- or five-page outline of what the Smith Papers actually should be: multivolumed, requiring many editors, not just one. And it came from Dean Jessee. Tell me how that came about, Dean. You seemed to be on one course in pursuing it; we were trying to open the doors, clear the way for you, and then suddenly you come out with this brand-new plan. Ron and I hadn’t thought in those terms. Maybe you [Ron] were, but I never heard us discuss it.

Ron Esplin: Let me just tell you one backstory to that, and then Dean can respond. As I reviewed some of the early work of Jed [Woodworth]

(he was our first full-time employee), some of the early work of Mark [Ashurst-McGee] on essentially the remake of *Papers of Joseph Smith, Volume 1*—the historical, autobiographical writings—and the *Journals 1*, I raised all sorts of questions about how decisions were made and why they were made. Was this the only way? Was this the best way? I remember you [Richard] got me on the personal autobiographical writings. You had nothing but praise for all of Dean's work, but you said that that volume was a puzzlement because you couldn't quite figure out why some things were in it and some things were missing. So I raised all these questions and put together a document that contained lots of questions and some proposals and some possibilities. Dean took that home and came back with a new plan. Now that's the way I remember getting Dean primed so that he could come back and tell us what we should be doing.

Richard Bushman: I'm mixed up on the chronology, but give us your version, Dean.

Dean Jessee: During the 1990s when we were working on those three volumes of the journal and thought we'd include the historical writings also, I hadn't really obtained a vision of what the Joseph Smith Papers should include. I was very frustrated during that decade or more trying to get those three volumes done. It wasn't until after the turn of the century that I could see, then, why this plodded along so slowly. The reason was we'd never defined the Joseph Smith Papers; we'd never determined exactly what they should be. When we started, I was working on those three volumes, and we had some student help at BYU. Of course, Ron was directing the institute there, and he was overworked and wasn't able to spend a lot of the time necessary to ride herd on the details. When Richard Bushman came on the scene and things started to change, there started to be some movement in the whole project, and we could see that it was going to go forward.

One of the things that helped push the thing forward was to include multiple editors and bring people in who would be professional and working full time, rather than student help. As we got started on that, in those early years right after the turn of the century, about 1999 and 2000, questions started coming as to how we were going to proceed. The picture that I had in my mind as far as Joseph Smith's papers was we would have the journals, the documents, and some legal and business material, and that would be about it. Some of those working on the individual volumes had questions, and one of those questions was, "What about these statements of Joseph Smith in the meetings that he held?" that were in the Kirtland council book, for example. There were many

meetings in which he talked and gave important instruction. How are we going to deal with that? There was no place for that.

I think it was Richard Jensen, just before this happened, who raised the question of what constitutes Joseph Smith's papers? We haven't really defined what Joseph Smith's papers are. Ron asked me to think about that over a weekend, and then in November 2002, I went home and I thought about where we'd been and all that had gone into this thing. And suddenly, it was made known to me that we just had totally ignored the bigger picture of what Joseph Smith's papers were. We hadn't included the histories, we hadn't included these types of things, and we hadn't included the administrative materials. The entire umbrella of what Joseph Smith's papers were had escaped me. I regard this as providential that that work plodded along so slowly, and it seemed like there were all kinds of roadblocks that cropped up, such as not getting access to material for six or eight years. It was almost laughable to think of the types of things that were happening, and I was very frustrated about it. I'm sure Ron was. We tried to figure things out to see how this could go forward.

After Richard Bushman came and Ron was relieved of his work as director of the Smith Institute, and Larry [H.] Miller came along,²⁵ and we had the decision to bring in multiple editors, and all of these things—it just started to fall into place. I was just floored to think that I hadn't really thought about it in the past. Right at the beginning, we should have decided what Joseph Smith's papers were. But I'm grateful that the project didn't bear fruit the way we had hoped because we were trying to drive that old Papers of Joseph Smith Project to its conclusion, and that was the plan that we were using at the beginning in 2000–2001.

When the Brethren came and gave us the stamp of approval, that was the plan that we were going to use. Right after that, this question came up as to the definition of the Joseph Smith Papers. I thought, Well, why should I be making this decision? Because any fool can see that the Joseph Smith Papers includes more than just what we were working on under that old Papers of Joseph Smith project. That's when we changed the name of it from the Papers of Joseph Smith to Joseph Smith Papers, so it wouldn't be confused. But that was the context in which that took place.

25. See "How the Joseph Smith Papers Became a Project of Consequence," herein, 147–48.

Richard Bushman: I would just say that it's typical that this change came from a question from Richard Jensen because he's the king of pesky questions. [*audience laughter*]

Dean Jessee: That's right.

Ron Esplin: I was just going to say Dean mentioned access. Just one example about access involved the Book of the Law of the Lord, which you can now enjoy on the internet. Everybody in the world can see it, but in the past, nobody could see it. We had to have special permission from the First Presidency for Dean to have access.

Dean Jessee: We really had to look at it more than once because when you make a copy the first time, you can't publish it that way; you've got to check the original again. So we had to go back to check it against the original before it was printed. In the *Personal Writings*, there was one segment that I wanted; I had to get access for it then. I had to get access for it again when we did the journal because the 1842 Joseph Smith journal is in the Book of the Law of the Lord and so on. But it wasn't just our situation. When we went to the Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints²⁶ in 1972 to start collecting the holograph material of Joseph, they allowed me to copy all of the letters they had of Joseph Smith to Emma except the October 1832 letter. They wouldn't allow me to have that, and they didn't give me a reason for it. It wasn't until Leonard [Arrington] interceded with one of their apostles who came out here to the Mormon History Association meetings that they were able to work out a trade to allow us to see that.²⁷

So this matter of access was a real problem at the beginning. I think probably with more communication to start with and a better understanding with what we were doing, maybe we could have avoided some of that.

Ron Esplin: Speaking of documents, I consider it providential that the project went from BYU to the Church History Department. Had we not come back where the documents were, it would have been a different

26. The RLDS Church changed its name to Community of Christ in 2001. "RLDS Church Changing Its Name: 'Community of Christ' Comes into Being Friday," *Deseret News*, April 5, 2001, <https://www.deseret.com/2001/4/5/19579122/rlds-church-changing-its-name/>.

27. "Letter to Emma Smith, 13 October 1832," in *Documents, Volume 2: July 1831–January 1833*, ed. Matthew C. Godfrey, Mark Ashurst-McGee, Grant Underwood, Robert J. Woodford, and William G. Hartley, Joseph Smith Papers (Church Historian's Press, 2013), 304–14, <https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/letter-to-emma-smith-13-october-1832/1>.

project. Here, we could have the conversations with General Authorities. We had those conversations in the 1980s and the 1990s, and at that time, you could not go from a BYU office or professorship to the General Authorities directly under any circumstances without the [BYU] administration. Had we not come up here where we could have those conversations and develop the trust, it would have been a different project.

Richard Bushman: And Rick and Elder Jensen were superb diplomats.

Ron Esplin: And Elder [Bruce C.] Hafen as well. Absolutely.

Richard Bushman: They were the ones who really brought it about.

Dean Jessee: I would add this: When we started on that journal project in 1986, that was the year that Ron Esplin took over for Leonard Arrington as the head of the Joseph Fielding Smith Institute. If it hadn't been for Ron, this whole thing would have died on the vine early on. I think his impact was tremendous, and it was needed. He had the skill and the ability to communicate with the Brethren and with BYU's administration. He was able to keep the thing afloat even though it was on dialysis. I'm grateful to him.

Richard Bushman: He won the confidence of everybody.

Dean Jessee: Right. And then Richard Bushman too. The impact of those men on this whole thing was what gave it the thrust to really put it in orbit. I'm grateful for that. It's really a blessing.

Matthew Godfrey: Just going along with this notion of trust, was there any specific moment or event that made you realize that we had the full trust of the Brethren, or was that trust present from the start?

Richard Bushman: I'm sure we all have a version of that. I'm not sure that there was one turning point when we really knew, but there were different kinds of trust. One kind of trust was, Can we trust you with these materials to present them properly, in a way that will not be offensive but will be fair and scholarly? That was one kind of trust. The greatest form of distrust was, Will you turn these books out in time? They were making this huge commitment, and they could see us dribbling, drabbling along over the centuries trying to get the books published. *[audience laughter]*

Ron Esplin: On time or at all?

Richard Bushman: At all, because we'd sort of come out of this BYU background where the productivity of the institute was always under scrutiny. It was a question that would come up again here, and that led to strains within the staff. Mark [Ashurst-McGee] was the champion of rigor. He and Dean took the stand, "We've got to do this right while we're

doing it.” I and Ron (to a somewhat lesser extent) were the champions of expediency: “We’ve got to get these books out.” It caused a million questions. We knew what the issues were; there wasn’t antagonism but constant pull and strain to pull it off.

Dean Jessee: When I came up with the new plan and I took it to our meeting, it was totally opposite from what we’d been doing. Well, it wasn’t totally opposite, but it was kind of startling for the reason that the earlier plan had just been authorized, we thought, by the Brethren. Now all of a sudden, we had a new plan, and the idea was then to accept it, forge ahead with it, and act upon it, but not share it with the Brethren until we got down the road a little bit further. That’s the way I understand it. To me, the moment when everything seemed to be rosy and the final approval had been given was that meeting of the 28th of June 2001, when the four Brethren of the apostleship and the four men from the Seventy came and met with us and launched the thing. That was before we had this change in the definition of the Joseph Smith Papers.

I felt good about it then, and I could see that things were heading in the right direction. We finally had our arms around the Joseph Smith Papers. Then I had a feeling that it was going to be great, especially with the talented people that had been brought on board to work on the individual volumes. Mark was there at the beginning, him and Angela [Ashurst]; there were the Darowskis [Joe and Kay Darowski]; there was Richard Jensen; and there was Sharalyn [Duffin Howcroft]. But that’s really a big blessing in my estimation, to see the way that this has flowered forth and become what it is. In my estimation too, I don’t know of another edited work that is superior to this one. I think it’s marvelous what has been produced, not only content-wise but just in the way it looks and the way it’s put together.

When we got the first *Personal Writings of Joseph Smith* and the old *Papers of Joseph Smith*, one day I opened up my book, and it came apart. I opened it up again, and it came apart in another place, and it was obvious to me that the binding was glued and not sewed. I thought, For Pete’s sake, here we’ve got Joseph Smith, the founder of this dispensation, and we can’t produce a book that would last longer than six months? [*audience laughter*] That was one of the things that bothered me when we went into this. To see just the craftsmanship of *The Joseph Smith Papers* today is marvelous. I have a copy of *Rough Stone Rolling*²⁸ that’s the same

28. Richard Lyman Bushman, with Jed Woodworth, *Joseph Smith: Rough Stone Rolling* (Alfred A. Knopf, 2005).

way—it's glued, and it's all coming apart. I have a copy of *Men with a Mission*,²⁹ and it's coming apart because of the glued binding.

In addition to the quality of the workmanship itself, just the quality of the research and the work that's gone into it is just marvelous. I believe what President [Henry B.] Eyring, or whoever it was in general conference, just said that “the Lord raises up angels”³⁰—and some of them are right here in this room—to do the work. That's the way I regard you folks. You're all angels, and the archangels are sitting here with me. [audience laughter]

Richard Bushman: I have a binding story. As Rick indicated, a lot of thought went into the design of the binding, every detail. At one point, we had pictures and models, and I looked at it and was a little uneasy about it because it seemed extravagant. It was sort of too elegant, too embellished. I pictured it on the library shelves, you know how you see these series all together, and I thought it would sort of outshine the George Washington papers. So I thought it was a little bit too much. I was trying to make this case, and Skip [Harry] Stout, who is the editor of the Jonathan Edwards Papers and was on our advisory board, was in the room. He said to me, “How would Joseph Smith have liked this binding?” I said, “He would have loved it!” [audience laughter] So that's how they look. [audience laughter]

Matthew Godfrey: I'd like to open it up for questions that anyone might have.

Richard Jensen:³¹ Just in connection with the issue of trust, might it be helpful to explain a little bit about the way in which we got permission to do the Council of Fifty minutes³² [see fig. 2]? How did that work out? Was it all downhill after what you've just been talking about?

Matthew Godfrey: Ron, do you want to address this question?

Ron Esplin: Richard Holzapfel and Alex Baugh at BYU were very interested in publishing “Declaration of the Twelve,” as the clerk filed

29. James B. Allen, Ronald K. Esplin, and David J. Whittaker, *Men with a Mission, 1837–1841: The Quorum of the Twelve Apostles in the British Isles* (Deseret Book, 1992).

30. Dean may be referring to President Eyring's April 2017 conference address titled “Walk with Me,” *Ensign*, May 2017, 82–85.

31. Richard Jensen was the former senior research and review editor of the Joseph Smith Papers.

32. The Council of Fifty was “an organization intended to establish the political kingdom of God on the earth.” “Council of Fifty,” Joseph Smith Papers, accessed June 20, 2025, <https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/topic/council-of-fifty>; Council of Fifty Record Books, 1844–1846, Church History Library, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, <https://catalog.churchofjesuschrist.org/record/81b63cd8-5249-4900-aebd-24ea05937605/0?view=browse>.



FIGURE 2. Council of Fifty Minutes. Photograph by Welden C. Andersen; courtesy Church History Library.

it—which we now know it was not—and enlisted me to work with them and see if we could sort out what it was. They wondered if maybe I could be a coauthor with them on a *BYU Studies* article. I said, “Yes—if we can get access to the Council of Fifty minutes and figure out indeed what it was.” Because on the face of it, it should have been associated with a meeting of the Council of Fifty. To make a long story short, I learned we couldn’t get access. We tried various things, and ultimately, it just seemed like it wasn’t going to happen. Richard Holzapfel had been called as a mission president in the South, and he was leaving. I said, “I’m not satisfied we know what it is. I can’t help you,” and they went ahead and published it.³³

Meanwhile, in 2009, I learned that Rick and Elder Jensen had type-scripts to the Council of Fifty minutes, and they had read them or were reading them. Susan Jackson was Neal Maxwell’s secretary, and when

33. Alexander L. Baugh and Richard Neitzel Holzapfel, “‘I Roll the Burthen and Responsibility of Leading This Church Off from My Shoulders on to Yours’: The 1844/1845 Declaration of the Quorum of the Twelve Regarding Apostolic Succession,” *BYU Studies* 49, no. 3 (2010): 4–19.

he died, she didn't get reassigned to another General Authority but was attached to the Office of the First Presidency. She helped us out in a number of ways, one of which was making an inventory of everything that was over there so that Rick and Elder Jensen could go through it and say, This may pertain to us. We need to see it. She also was invited to do a transcript of the Council of Fifty minutes for the Office of the First Presidency, and it's that transcript that Elder Jensen and Rick were reading in 2009. When I learned this, I talked to Elder Jensen and said, "Will you help me figure out what it can tell us about the last charge of Joseph to the Twelve, which presumably occurred on the 26th of March 1844, and this document in Orson Hyde's hand? We don't know if he wrote it, and if you can shed some light on it, we really need to know that."

So one Sunday afternoon Elder Jensen was in Huntsville with the manuscript, and I was in Sandy, going back and forth over the phone. "Check the 26th of March." He fumbled around and said, "There isn't a 26th of March entry." I said, "There has to be. There was a meeting that day. And the official minutes don't even have an entry?" He said, "I'm sorry. It's not there." It turned out that in spite of doing a pretty decent job on that transcript—we made changes, of course, but she had a pretty good transcript—she had mistyped a really fancy "6" for a "1." So there were two 21 March entries, but one was actually the 26th. At any rate, that was the closest I got to the minutes since Elder [Joseph] Anderson told us in the 1970s his story of Heber J. Grant filing them away and telling him he wouldn't need to have access to them.³⁴

Eventually, Rick and Elder Jensen allowed me access to the minutes. I had access to those after 2010 and enjoyed reading them, learning about them, beginning to probe them, until the permission finally did come to publish them. Gerrit [Dirkmaat] and Mark [Ashurst-McGee] and Matt Grow and I, as well as Eric Smith and others, worked on that great volume.

Mark Ashurst-McGee:³⁵ And Jeff Mahas.

Ron Esplin: Jeff Mahas was crucial. He did a lot of great work on that. Access to the Council of Fifty minutes had become, as you all know, a litmus test.³⁶ The Church was newly open and transparent—it wasn't just public affairs that were using those words; General Authorities were

34. Ronald K. Esplin, "Understanding the Council of Fifty and Its Minutes," *BYU Studies* 55, no. 3 (2016): 7–8.

35. At the time of this roundtable, Mark Ashurst-McGee was the senior research and review editor for the Joseph Smith Papers.

36. Esplin, "Understanding the Council of Fifty and Its Minutes," 6–33.

using the words. But people would say, “We’ll believe it when we get the Council of Fifty minutes.” I was asked many times, “Well, what about the Council of Fifty? You say this is going to be comprehensive. Are you going to get those?” I said, “We’re still at Kirtland; it’s not relevant yet. I’m confident when we get there, we’ll have permission,” although none of us could know for sure. Even Elder Jensen didn’t know when. He got in trouble, you may remember, for a fireside he did in California that was on the internet the next morning about having made a comment that the Council of Fifty minutes would soon be available. It wasn’t soon, but it was eventually.

So I think the confidence that we’ve talked about already that Rick, Elder Jensen, and some of the executive directors of the department before Elder Jensen helped engender made it possible for us to get the final piece. They believed we would handle it right, and they believed it should be comprehensive.

Some of you will remember that we delayed publication of *Journals, Volume 3* because we figured we could not go forward and *not* use that record to annotate the last few months. So it was put quietly on the shelf, and then we did get permission and did use it to annotate with the full publication to follow.

Spencer W. McBride:³⁷ [This is] a question for all, but especially for Richard. As a historian on the project, I use *Rough Stone Rolling* all the time in my research and annotation of context of these documents. Now that we have sixteen print volumes—and I was looking ahead at biographies of Joseph Smith in the future but also your own—do you see anything drastically different in how you would approach *Rough Stone Rolling* if you were writing it today, or would it really just be minor tweaks here and there?

Richard Bushman: Well, I wanted to say first of all that I’m deeply grateful that I finished this book before these things were published. [audience laughter] My job would have been much, much harder. I will also say that I read all these things as a member of the advisory board. I’m always enthralled with the annotation; it’s just terrific. At this point, I haven’t stepped back far enough to sort of see the overall picture other than that there would be a lot more legal stuff that would have to be put in. But on one detailed point after another, the depth of research in that annotation is really awe inspiring. It’s fantastic work.

37. At the time this roundtable was held, Spencer McBride was a volume editor with the Joseph Smith Papers.

Ron Esplin: But you know we had the royal battle over how much to annotate and what was acceptable and what was too much. People would say, “You’re annotating much more than all these other projects.” Dean’s answer was, “Well, they would do it if they could, but they don’t have the resources we have, the talent. We can do it, and we will.”

Richard Bushman: Well, that’s true. We were really going upstream.

Ron Esplin: We were.

Richard Bushman: Because the whole tendency in documentary editing was to lighten annotation.

Ron Esplin: It was even more than Elder Jensen was prepared to accept, as you recall our battles over *Journals, Volume 1*. He got an anonymous reviewer, which still remains anonymous to me. I don’t know who it was, and when I find out, I’m going to talk with him or her. [audience laughter] At any rate, the anonymous reviewer said, “This is so overdone that it is impossible to use. I would take Dean Jessee’s original work over this any day, and anybody who’s thinking would.” So Elder Jensen said, “What about this, brethren?” (It happened to be men in the room.) Richard said, “Well, you can’t just dismantle it. This book has been prepared carefully brick by brick, and you can’t just start pulling out bricks.” You [Richard] held the line there.

The bottom line was I went through *Journals, Volume 1* very carefully, taking out words, taking out of the whole book maybe two dozen footnotes, consolidating all I could, and gave it back to Elder Jensen. It must have been a better day because he loved it then, and we hadn’t changed it that much. [audience laughter] So that’s the standard, and we’ve gone forward—except we’ve gotten worse.

Matthew Godfrey: I was going to say, it’s still our most lightly annotated volume. [audience laughter]

Richard Bushman: Do you have another comment, Mark?

Mark Ashurst-McGee: It seems like, about 2006 maybe, I was hearing little things from people that the project was in jeopardy.

Ron Esplin: When, 2016?

Mark Ashurst-McGee: No, around 2005 or 2006 or something like that—shortly after we moved to the Church Office Building.

Ron Esplin: I don’t think so. However, there was a time when the directors council ran the department. To show the respect we had with our colleagues in the department, the directors council made a list of priorities for the department, and we were not one, two, three, four, five—we were not on the list. So if it came to the directors voting, there

was a time in 2006 and 2007 that we would not have received any support. But we always had the support from Rick and Elder Jensen.

Matthew Godfrey: Maybe one last question, and then we'll close.

Audience question: Just wondering how it was decided that the First Presidency and the Quorum of the Twelve would review Joseph Smith Papers volumes and not Correlation.

Ron Esplin: From the beginning, part of the authorization of the project included an agreement with the First Presidency and Quorum of the Twelve that these volumes would be reviewed by members of the First Presidency and Quorum of the Twelve and approved by them—not by Correlation. As Rick used to put it, Correlation is a substitute for the First Presidency and Quorum of the Twelve, who can't read everything. And because they're reading ours, nobody else needs to worry. That's been from the get-go, long before we had something for them to review.

Let me say one other little interesting anecdote to show how much things have changed. Style guides can be contentious, and no part of our style guide was more contentious than "JS" for an abbreviation or "Smith" instead of "Joseph the Prophet." A lot of folks had a lot of heartburn over that. One of the senior Brethren, whom I happen to know pretty well so that I could engage him on this question, sent back a review of *Journals 1* with big red writing all over a page or two saying, "Smith, Smith, Smith. I've had all the Smith I could stand." I sent him a long email explaining what we were doing and why we were doing it, and he said, "I knew when I expressed my heartburn I'd be giving heartburn to you. But now that you've explained it, I guess I could live with it."

Elder Jensen called me into his office with a member of the Seventy who'd been an academic at the University of Virginia (which was founded by Thomas Jefferson) and who was upset with our style guide on "Smith" and "JS." We sat across the table, and I told him about the convention in documentary editing. It's "TJ" in the Jefferson Papers. We can't be overly familiar, we have to have a scholarly discourse and distance, and he said, "Even at the university, it's Mr. Jefferson." But he could live with it eventually, too. Now it seems fine, although occasionally I see myself writing "Young" and "Young" and "Smith" and "Smith" too many times.

Matthew Godfrey: All right. I wonder if we could conclude by just having each of you offer any advice for us as we go forward.

Dean Jessee: Keep doing your push-ups, and keep up the good work.

Richard Bushman: Well, I think you should be proud of yourselves and don't stop. I also think you should be humble. I think you should pray about your work. This is not Thomas Jefferson. This is Joseph Smith, and it's very important that in all our words, we have inspiration to keep us on the right track. I think we have to be generous with one another. There has to be a brotherly and sisterly spirit here as well as a scholarly spirit.

Ron Esplin: Amen to that. I think what I would say is what I said to Matt Grow last week. I'm just finishing my review of *Documents, Volume 8* a little late. Matt was commenting that as volumes go down through the process, we get lighter and lighter feedback because people are comfortable with what we're doing, they know what we're doing, we know what we're doing, and we have quality work. I said, "Well, I've got quite a bit of feedback. A tremendous amount of great work in *Docs 8*, a wonderful volume. I couldn't be more pleased with it. I couldn't have written it," I told Matt, "but I can critique it. And I have critiqued it and do have feedback." But I will tell you that with every volume I've read, I've said to myself, If this was Dean and I alone doing it, it would never look like this. As much as I love what Dean did as a one-man show, much as I know a lot of the history, I could not produce what you are producing, and I praise you all.

I second Richard's comment that it is a sacred work and that if we do it prayerfully, using all of our academic and spiritual skills, we'll continue to be successful and we'll finish this in the grand style it's begun.

Dean Jessee: Now let me add that as members of the Church, we have here the papers of the founding of the dispensation of the fulness of times and the papers of the Prophet to establish that. I'm very grateful and very humbled by that thought—that here we have that kind of information and are engaged in this. I was born on the west side of town, and I can't imagine why I was involved in this at all. Yet I've been able to have a front-row seat in it. I'm grateful to all of you for all that you've done on this. I can see the providential aspect of it. I can see that in every volume that's been produced, and I appreciate it very much.

Matthew Godfrey: Join with me in thanking our panel. [audience applause]